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Fansubbing in China: Technology-Facilitated Activism in Translation

Dingkun Wang and Xiaochun Zhang

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the socio-political tension between freedom and constraints in the Chinese fansubbing network. It views the development of fansubbing in China as a process of technology democratisation with the potential to liberate ordinary citizens from authoritarian and commercial imperatives, enabling them to contest official state domination. The paper draws on the strategies adopted by fansubbing groups to organise their working practices and interactive social activities with a view to engaging target audiences. Both facets complement each other and bring to the fore the 'gamified' system of fansubbing networks. Gamification enables ordinary citizens to translate, distribute and consume foreign audiovisual products in ways they consider appropriate, in a strategic move that opposes collective activism to government dominance.

Keywords: fansubbing, China, technology, domination, gamification

1. Introduction

Translation technology has broadened the spectrum of translation scholarship and blurred the boundaries between professional and non-professional fields (Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva 2012). Research in translation studies has begun to analyse the interplay between human and non-human agents in the process of translation as well as the influence of such interplay on the outcome of translation (Bowker 2006, Moorkens et al. 2014, Olohan 2011). Given the increasing importance

of translation technologies, the acquisition of technological skills is deemed key to the development of translation competence in institutional training and real-time practice (Quah 2006). Even so, despite the ever greater automation envisaged by machine translation technology (Kenny 2011), new technologies and tools such as translation memories are unlikely to replace human translators. Computer-aided translation practice has, rather, increasingly become “a decentered process conducted by teams of people linked electronically through technological systems” (Tymoczko 2005, 1089), where the shift from the individual to the group is a consequence of the “increased networking and interdependence of the world” (Tymoczko 2009, 401). Fansubbing exemplifies this shift, and it pushes (traditional) ethical and (commercial) copyright boundaries (Dwyer 2012).

Fansubbed materials range from anime, manga and comics to a large variety of genres and media disseminated through TV channels, movies and video games. In the spirit of “by fans for fans” (Diaz Cintas and Sanchez 2006), fansubbers act “effectively as self-appointed translation commissioners” (Pérez-González 2007, 71) who choose not only what is to be subtitled, but also how to subtitle. Fansubbing can thus be considered a form of user-led cultural production which entails a democratisation of technology (Burgess 2006). Its political potential has gradually become evident in a shift of power from cultural elites to grassroots users that increasingly allows the latter to judge and interpret cultural forms and commodities (Hartley 2004). Fansubbing favours “the creation of networks of amateur translators involved in practices of cultural resistance against global capitalist structures through interventionist forms of subtitling” (Pérez-González 2012b, 6, 2012a). Research into such forms of non-professional translation can widen our understanding of the

potential uses of translation and of its ideological and political effects. This paper seeks to explore the ideological impact of technology on fansubbing in the socio-political context of the People's Republic of China.

2. Fansubbing and gamification in China

Much existing research tends to emphasise the activist nature of fansubbing, but a number of questions are yet to be answered; in particular, what exactly are the fansubbers resisting and to what extent has fansubbing challenged the industry (Gambier 2015). Fansubbing groups in China have crossed the boundary from cultural practice towards political activism, which has engendered an alternative power dynamics different from official translation practices. First, the spread of fansubbing exposes further a paradoxical situation exemplified by the continuous enforcement of state censorship in China. The ruling Communist Party has a long-standing dual policy to discipline its citizens, but to also guarantee state-approved popular forms of entertainment (Zhao 1998, 43, Fung 2009). The Chinese authorities allow “market-driven popular culture and soft entertainment” to thrive, but let them serve only “a conservative role of social pacification and thus function to sustain the party’s continuing political dominance” (Zhao 2008, 223). In this respect, fansubbing embodies a new and vibrant element in Chinese popular culture and in the country’s entertainment industry, because Chinese audiences who access fansubbed media content tend to be aware of the extent to which official censorship deprives officially imported foreign films and television series of their authenticity (Gao 2012). Secondly, those web-based projects by fansubbing groups are on the cusp of changing the field of Chinese audiovisual translation with respect to the game-changing effect on state-sponsored film translation which still fulfils gate-keeping tasks for the

Chinese regime. Nonetheless, official translation practices have started to depart from rigid linguistic prescriptions by beginning to mimic the largely informal style of fansubs (Lv and Li 2013).

Most importantly, in a country where dubbing used to be the only means of audiovisual accessibility (Qian 2009, Du, Li, and Cheng 2013), fansubbing activities have significant subversive potential to forge new ties with target audiences (Kung 2016). Massidda (2015) connects the web-based activities of fansubbing with “digital playbour” (Scholz 2013) where work and play coexists. The recent development of fansubbing in China also reflects the tendency of introducing fun into translation, which is can be explained by the concept of gamification, defined as “taking game mechanics and applying [them] to other web properties to increase engagement” (Terill 2008). The guiding idea behind gamification is “to use elements of game design in non-game contexts, products, and services to motivate desired behaviours” (Deterding 2012, 14). In essence, gamification is about “using game principles, like rewards, level up, and flow, to engage users and influence their behaviour, knowledge, attitudes, or skills” (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 2013, 243).

3. State domination and Civil Disobediance

In spite of an “unbroken line” of censorship throughout the history of China (Tan 2015), there has been little research on state censorship by Chinese translation scholars. A considerable body of research has focused on literary, cultural and political censorship (Cornelius and Smith 2002, Gao 2009, Kuhn 2010, Lam 2000, Xie, S. 2012a, Zhu 2008), but the role of translation and translators has largely passed unnoticed. The very few studies on censorship and translation have mainly targeted

the following two aspects: the state-sponsored translation of Chinese literature into English, which aims to propagate China's soft power and cultural prestige among Chinese citizens and internationally (Chang 2015, Di 2014, Volland 2008); and the import of foreign literature through translation into Chinese, which often results in the expurgation of foreign images and memes for political and cultural reasons (Chang 2008, Tan 2015, Chan 2007). A recent study by Lv and Li sponsored by the Chinese Ministry of Education set foot on the challenge to official censorship posed by the increasing availability of electronic content disseminated through the Internet. Despite seeing the "de-professionalising" effect of fansubbing on officially supervised subtitling (2015), the authors fail to address the complex relationship between technology, state domination and civil disobedience by arguing for the intervention of policy-makers in web-based translation practice so as to "guide it to develop more healthily" (126). The tendency to deprofessionalise can be demonstrated by exploring the power struggles between the state audiovisual censorship and fansubbing groups.

Audiovisual censorship in China involves the interplay of several official institutions. The Chinese government is directly involved in the film industry and the complex regulatory structures governing the media: the China Film Corporation exerts substantial control over the distribution, import and export of films; the Exhibition Bureau and its regional subsidiaries regulate contracts and admission prices; the Ministry of Culture monitors the import and distribution of home videos; and the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) regulates the editing and exhibition of films (Wang 2010, Pang 2011, Qian 2009, Yeh and Davis 2008, Xie, T. 2012). It is the SAPPRFT, above all, that supervises all matters related to cultural and media production and that guards access to foreign

(popular) cultural and media content on behalf of the central government (Bai 2013).

The SAPPRFT (2014) bans all content from public access that

- denies the basic principles determined by the constitution
- affects the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of China
- leaks classified information threatening domestic security
- encourages hatred and discrimination among ethnic groups
- violates ethical cultural norms and principles
- propagates cults and superstitions
- disturbs social order and threatens social stability
- depicts pornography, gambling, violence, or abets people to commit crimes
- humiliates or defames others, or damages the lawful interests of others
- compromises social morality or traditional cultures in China
- contains information which is prohibited by law

There are, however, no comprehensive definitions and guidelines regarding the individual elements targeted by censorship (Makinen 2015), since in actual practice Chinese censorship is “contextual, individualized, and continuously negotiable rather than absolute or binding” (Calkins 1998, 243). There exist, for instance, no precise descriptive guidelines on how notions such as social morality and traditional culture are to be understood, nor are there any indications on what kind of content may compromise such values. The focus of censorship is on the content itself, and therefore actual criteria vary from case to case (Bai 2013). The censors seem to approve or reject a particular film or programme based on what they consider an appropriate ‘contextual’ interpretation of the above regulations.

The authorities are of course aware of the challenges posed by the Internet, and they seek to tighten their control over digital space. The latest amendment to the *Regulations for Supervising Online Distribution and Publication* (网络出版服务管理规定) (Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of the People's Republic of China 2016), implemented on 10 March 2016, imposes further restrictions on foreign audiovisual enterprises in distributing their products in China on the basis of existing partnerships with local (online) media (Voice of America 2016). The new policy also denies the autonomy of domestic private Internet in purchasing, appraising, translating and broadcasting foreign audiovisual products. Moreover, this new policy renders the authorisation and copyrighting of foreign audiovisual products as separate and mutually exclusive procedures. It reserves for the state administrations the power to authorise distribution and exhibition. In this respect, copyright is not considered by the government a lawful endorsement for local private online media in China to distribute foreign digital media products. This government stance continues to face persistent pressures from civil disobedience, with various groups – who feel empowered by the progress and spread of information and communication technologies – “defying law for a good course” (Klang 2004).

Technological evolution does not serve any predefined goals, and it can be regarded as an “‘ambivalent’ process of development suspended between different possibilities” (Feenberg 2010, 15). This apparent state of affairs brings to light the paradox that the spread of technology supports yet simultaneously weakens state domination. From the birth of television and video technology up to modern digital interconnectivity, the very same technologies harnessed for political and ideological

control may be utilised by audiences to gain freedom from state domination. Home-video technology was introduced to Chinese audiences soon after television in the late 1980s, and audiovisual piracy arose as a persistent by-product (Creemer 2012, Yang 2009, Wang 2003). Chinese authorities have never accepted the idea of an infinite (and thus uncontrollable) cyberspace, and they remain at pains to keep digital space under tight ideological and political supervision (Tsui 2003), yet the state's monopoly over online access has paradoxically facilitated the expansion of the Internet in China (Zhang 2006, 286). Today's viewers, in any case, find that the Internet is more compatible with their lives than other consumption patterns associated with television, DVDs and cinema (Zhang 2013).

The Internet functions as a technology of freedom as well as control in Chinese society (Tsui 2003). Given that there is not necessarily a causal relation between web-based dissident activities and civil disobedience in the real world (Herold 2008), it is fair to argue that the majority of studies focusing on the Internet in China somewhat overemphasise the apparent threat posed by the free digital flow of information (Weber and Jia 2007, MacKinnon 2008, Wang and Hong 2010, Yang, Tang, and Wang 2015). The emergence of digital consumerist cultures in contemporary China has led Internet users to regard social, recreational and commercial web-based activities as more important than activities within the political domain (Damm 2007, Zhang 2006). Nevertheless, the Internet has been utilised to channel civil disobedience, particularly among young and well-educated urbanites in China (Tang and Yang 2011), and fansubbing and the consumption of fansubbed media constitute one facet in this tale of resistance to state domination.

4. Fansubbing as a force against state domination

The cross-cultural phenomenon of fansubbing turns the formerly prosperous business of product piracy into a voluntary social activity. Thanks to the development of fansubbing, those who disobey state domination in China become increasingly visible to the public. This techno-social activity emerged in China in the late 1990s and became widespread between 2003 and 2005, largely as a result of nationwide access to Web 2.0 as well as various peer-to-peer file-sharing protocols (e.g. bit-torrent) and user-friendly downloading programmes such as *Xun Lei* (迅雷, *Thunder*). Numerous fansubbing groups were formed to translate a wide variety of television series and films by means of organised peer production, and their Chinese versions were subsequently shared on the *BT@China* website. A few of these groups merged with or assimilated other groups to form larger teams, which then became the major players in Chinese fansubbing, including *YYeTs*, *YDY*, *Fr1000*, *Shengcheng* and *i.Kamigami*.

Fansubbing inevitably threatens copyright protection, the improvement of which was one of the key objectives by the Chinese government in order to win global recognition (Pang 2012). As a result, the SAPPRFT and other censorship institutions have taken decisive steps to crack down on the fansubbing network since 2009. In order to survive, some fansubbing groups joined legitimate commercial enterprises to assist them in translating foreign-language entertainment and educational media. The fansubbing network *YYeTs*, for example, was hired in 2010 to produce subtitles of the American television series *Lost* (2004-2010) for the video-streaming platform Sohu (www.sohu.com) (Hu 2013). In the same year, the group was also hired by the website NetEase (www.163.com) to translate some of Yale University's open courses. Groups such as *YDY* and *Fr1000* refused to join the commercial sector because, in

their opinion, this move was in contradiction to the ethos and spirit of fansubbing, i.e. to uphold the values of free content-sharing, community and voluntarism (Zhang and Mao 2013). They eventually had to cease their fansubbing activities by the end of 2014 due to pressure from the government and copyright holders as well as insufficient financial resources. In contrast to its fallen counterparts, YYeTs strove to maintain its relationship with major enterprises and transform its former website into a social network for American TV enthusiasts. This is ultimately in service to its continued fansubbing and free content-sharing activities on its renewed website and elsewhere. Its persistent operation makes activism become increasingly prominent in the context of fansubbing,

Unlike partnerships with the private commercial sector, the sharing of fansubbed resources on alternative platforms moves this form of translation into illegal territory. In China, however, the legal framework and public awareness surrounding copyright protection rest on shaky foundations (He 2014, Hsiao 2014). Fansubbing groups operate in a legal grey zone because their materials are unavailable in official distribution channels. Their translation output does not count as authorised intellectual property, so it does not cause a loss of revenues for foreign media companies (Meng and Wu 2013, 130). Moreover, audiovisual piracy in general and fansubbing in particular have largely been taken for granted rather than considered a major concern by ordinary citizens (Wilson 2011, 225). In fact, the official enforcement of copyright protection is hardly plausible, as the government's primary concern is to secure broadcasting rights for its own benefit rather than to protect the interests of copyright holders (Hu 2013, 443).

At present, video-streaming services must be provided by licensed enterprises that are either state-owned or state-controlled (The State Administration of Press 2014). However, even these media enterprises may risk violating rules, when, for instance, the state-owned online video-streaming platform CNTV was sued by two private video websites, LeTV and *Xun Lei Kan Kan*, for broadcasting more than 100 of their copyrighted programmes without their permission (Hu 2013). As a consequence, social media networks often criticise the contradictory copyright protection measures instigated by the Chinese government. This is evident in the comments posted by viewers on Sina Weibo (新浪微博, Sina Microblog), a China's answer to Twitter, in support of fansubbing groups on World Intellectual Property Day, which took place on 26 April 2013. Among the comments, a metaphor comparing fansubbers to Prometheus has been widely quoted, with the expression “pirates are fire-bringers” (盗版者就是盗火者) aptly illustrating the views of those audiences who consider fansubbing a quasi-heroic rather than an illegitimate activity (Chen and Yan 2014). It is indeed not unreasonable to argue that fansubbing groups have inspired their audiences to confront the hegemonic power of the state, even though fansubbers rarely voice any explicit protest against official oppression. Fansubbing in China can be viewed as a form of ‘fan activism’, and to the extent in which it bears elements of anti-capitalist struggle it can be seen as a “grass-roots resistance to cultural capitalism and its colonization of the life worlds of those whose authentic relationship to their cultural forms, identities, and practices cannot be reduced to disciplined, obedient consumption” (Rowe, Ruddock, and Hutchins 2010, 229).

Fan activism is centred on an ethos of volunteerism (or the wish to help), community building, the sharing of experiences, and it ultimately rests on a shared enthusiasm in

the consumption of media products (Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2011). The so-called fandoms, the communities formed by fans, always have the potential to become vehicles of resistance and catalysts for change in a world dominated by national powers and economic enterprises (Brough and Shresthova 2012). At the same time, of course, fans have to rely on the resources provided by the dominant powers in order to establish free creative spaces that enable them to act autonomously (Duncombe 2002). By announcing their engagement with a particular issue in a given participative framework, they often promote discourses differing from or even contradicting the ones upheld by those in power (Jenkins 2014).

In 2009, the government began to prosecute several popular fansubbing groups. After the shutdown of BT@China, a former portal to a number of fansubbing websites, other large groups such as YYeTs began to provide shelter for smaller ones whilst spreading out to multiple web addresses in order to remain active. In the wake of intensifying official prosecution between 2011 and early 2014, they had to be prepared to cease such alliances at any time and strive to survive on their own. During this period, YYeTs did not provide download links to popular films on its own website, but links to other websites where those films were available for download. The site frequently put up a notice saying “for copyright reasons, no download service is provided for this film. Only the text files of subtitles and the trailer are provided” (版权问题本片不提供下载，只提供字幕文件和预告片). Right below it, another notice written in bold characters revealed that “our resources are from the websites below. You can go to these websites and find out if they provide download links to the film” (本站资源来源于以下网站，你可以到这些网站查看是否有下载). From mid-2014 onwards, YYeTs has been sharing resources on the website

<http://cili007.com/>, and in cooperation with a number of other groups it has built the open-source database Sub HD (www.subhd.com), where users can download subtitle files compatible with various video formats.

While other fansubbing groups were forced to witness the closure of their servers and IP addresses, YYeTs continued to communicate with its audiences from its former IP address between late 2014 and early 2015, acknowledging their long-standing support and continuing to call for free sharing, learning and social progress. On 29 November 2014, shortly after the announcement of its closure, YYeTs posted a short-lived message on its homepage and on its webpage on Sina Weibo showing the Latin words “invictus maneo” (I remain unvanquished) (Yang 2014). Soon after the message was posted, a group named *Ji Guang* (极光) started operating for a short period of time, sharing resources on Baidu Cloud, a Chinese counterpart to Google Drive. *Ji Guang* remained active only during the time when YYeTs was unavailable, though there was no sign that the two groups were connected. Meanwhile, a short message announcing that the website was in a process of transformation was posted at the former web address of YYeTs, along with a countdown until the site’s return. On 6 February 2015, YYeTs returned and has been operating on two separate platforms since then. One is *Ren Ren Mei Ju* (人人美剧, YYeTs’ American TV Series; www.rrmj.tv), a social network for enthusiasts of foreign popular entertainment media, and the other is SUBTITLES at www.zimuzu.tv, where YYeTs continues its fansubbing and free content-sharing activities. On 29 May 2015, the social networking application programme *Ren Ren Mei Ju* was put online for users of mobile devices to download. In October 2015, an updated version, *Ren Ren Mei Ju 2.0*, was released to provide online streaming of popular American television series subtitled by YYeTs. To use

the video-streaming service one needs to have a mobile number registered in China. In March 2016, YYeTs started to use their logo on their subtitled American TV drama together with the link www.zimuzu.tv. YYeTs has been proactive in diversifying the functions of fansubbing media, and other groups have adopted similar strategies to continue their operations. In cycles of acquiescence to power and resistance, fansubbing groups strive to remain active and upgrade their websites to create multifunctional virtual communities, an idea which will be elaborated in the next section.

5. Gamification in Fansubbing Media

Technological expertise has enabled fansubbing groups to encroach (at least to a certain extent) on the social dynamics of power by applying rules of gaming systems to subtitling and other activities on their websites. The usage of technology fosters a sense of community which tends to be forged through interpersonal ties that enable sociability, peer support and the sharing of information, as well as a sense of belonging and social identity. It can also conceivably be claimed that relationships in cyberspace complement relationships in the real world and render the reality of community from geographical locations to person-based networks in cyberspace (Wellman 2001).

A fansubbing group functions as a virtual social space where its members are bound by a sense of community based on their shared commitment, skills and purposes (O'Hagan 2011), it is a space where they may also provide support for each other and new members in developing translation and technological expertise (O'Hagan 2009). Within the virtual community, each subtitling project is produced by its members

through a tight-knit and vertical distribution of labour that differs from what is commonly known as crowdsourcing, in which collaborations tend to be based on a horizontal distribution of labour involving a vast Internet population (Howe 2008), often by means of less organised, less structured, and in many cases temporary problem-solving mechanisms. The vertical structure of a fansubbing group establishes a hierarchy among its members which depends on their length of membership, the extent of their dedication and their contribution to the community among other factors. In an online community, hierarchy functions as a generative force which is manifested in a process of learning and socialisation between newcomers and veterans, peripheral participants and core members, and ordinary contributors and decision-makers, rather than functioning as a repressive force that sustains peer production at both organisational and discursive levels (Berdou 2010). This ‘generative’ hierarchy also serves to enhance communication between fansubbing groups and their audiences, and to involve them in their networked cultural practices.

Fansubbing groups revise their subtitling outputs constantly, taking into consideration audience feedback posted on Bulletin Board System (BBS) forums. Areas for improvement often include the translation of specific lines and cultural references, the coordination among the subtitles, the corresponding soundtrack and visuals, forms of presentation (e.g. fonts, colour and position of subtitles), and the quality of videos, which are in high-definition formats with resolutions ranging from 576 to 1280 horizontal lines. Fansubbing groups realised early on that audiences are eager to know more about their internal organization and that many are willing to deepen their involvement in the network. In fact, before fansubbing groups started interacting with audiences, the latter created a number of user discussion forums that existed on

various Chinese websites, particularly Baidu Bar (百度吧), a BBS forum which allows users to form discussion groups based on their preferences and topics. By facilitating multiple activities on their websites and utilising commercial social networking platforms, fansubbing groups seek to engage audiences further in fansubbing media.

Fansubbing groups often interact with their audiences on the Chinese social networking platform *WeChat* (微信). This platform is designed solely for mobile devices, especially smartphones. It realises the ‘free flow’ of information within the context of stringent Internet surveillance in China (Wang and Gu 2016) while providing instant messaging, video chat, e-publishing and blogging to more than 600 million users from more than 200 countries and regions (Yan 2015). Through updates posted by fansubbing groups in blogging spaces on *WeChat*, audiences can learn about the latest progress in fansubbing output and receive up-to-date news on foreign entertainment media. News content shared or translated by fansubbing groups is often ahead of and more diverse than information provided through official media channels. When a news message becomes translated, *the translator* provides a link to the source text or, more commonly, the original article is displayed together with its translation. Despite its popularity among Chinese users, WeChat is not an ideal channel of interaction between fansubbing groups and their audiences because it is obliged to detect and erase information unpalatable to official standards (Jiang 2016). As a result, fansubbing groups strive to fully engage audiences by develop multiple functions on their own websites.

Internet users must register for membership on fansubbing websites in order to access the database of fansubbed video resources. YYeTs offers several alternative methods for users to upgrade and obtain more streamlined access to downloadable resources. Users can log into the group's website (<http://www.zimuzu.tv/>) and click the button labelled '签到/升级' (sign in to upgrade) to access the webpage for upgrading. They need to keep performing this routine for twenty days in order to upgrade to a higher level. However, this upgrade model has limited capacity in enhancing the participatory and social networking functions of these fansubbing websites, as access to downloadable resources seems to be the only reason for users to engage. Alternatively, users can install the *Ren Ren Mei Ju* 2.0 application on their mobile devices and participate in a number of social networking activities so as to gain credits for upgrade purposes. They can choose to complete easy tasks such as tapping the '签到' (sign in) button, sharing their thoughts about the American television series they have just viewed, and commenting on other users' blog updates. Alternatively, in order to gain more credits and upgrade faster, they can complete more difficult tasks such as writing film reviews, organising discussions and recommending themselves to core members of YYeTs in order to join the group's subtitling crew. Depending on their level of difficulty, these activities allow users to earn different amounts of credit, and YYeTs provides details on the number of credits generated by various activities. Users are willing to participate because the higher the levels they reach, the better video-streaming services they can enjoy on *Ren Ren Mei Ju* 2.0 and the more downloadable resources they can access on the YYeTs' website.

The technological expertise of Chinese fansubbing groups allows them to enhance the technical and qualitative aspects of subtitling. Most fansubbing groups create parallel,

bilingual subtitles, presenting target audiences with source-language information and its translation. This parallel presentation is also used in the translation of entertainment news. These groups deliberately highlight the ‘uncensored nature’ of their translations and thus inevitably put themselves in opposition to the regime. Fansubbing audiences, moreover, are invited to help enhancing the quality of subtitles, while the purposes and processes underlying authorised subtitling practice are largely banned from public view. Shortly after publishing their translation output, fansubbing groups receive feedback from audiences through various channels, upon which they tend to be willing to revise and improve their translations. In stark contrast, subtitlers working for authorised media do not have the authority to review and revise their work once it has entered the public realm. Chinese fansubbing groups have, indeed, developed a transparent platform of networked cross-cultural mediation. By involving audiences more deeply in their interactive technologies, fansubbing media have evolved into interactive social spaces that may well have become a ‘gamified’ system that supports the translation, evaluation, distribution and consumption of foreign audiovisual products.

6. Rethinking state domination through the lens of gamification

As it progresses, technology continues to bring “centralized, hierarchical social structure” to everywhere it goes (Feenberg 2002, 24). While various types of technological mediation help to consolidate modern forms of hegemony, the evolution of digital networking leads to a certain decrease of social and political domination (Feenberg 2010, xxiii). The fansubbing network provides a digital social space where media consumers are empowered by technology to translate the contents of foreign audiovisual products. Although expressions of activism are rare, fansubbing groups

resist official domination by pursuing an egalitarian ethos in web-based interactive social spaces. The methods used by fansubbing groups on their websites, such as offering rewards for writing film reviews, upgrading for better resources, and the credit system, can be seen as a ‘gamification’ of translation. Translating in a fansubbing group is similar to the experience of playing a game, with enthusiastic audiences being encouraged to collaborate in the production of subtitles. Translators can gain virtual rewards and real recognition from fellow translators and audiences, and they can enhance their translation skills and move up in the hierarchical system, which resembles the world of social online games. Moreover, the audience interacts with the fansubbing group like in a video game, with audiences entertained not only by watching subtitled media content but also by gaining rewards and moving to higher levels on multifunctional websites. By adopting gamification tools, fansubbing groups can create a stable community while marketing their output to larger audiences. In the realm of audiovisual media, the production and distribution of translation virtually becomes ‘gamified’. In contrast, the Chinese authorities themselves do not view media products as pure entertainment, but as serious matters requiring ideological guidance and market control.

The gamification of subtitling media products may also provide some insight into the way fansubbers are challenging professional subtitling practice. Gamification entails an attempt to improve existing structures, services and products, it is regarded as a concept which “very much ends up sounding more like marketing than anything else” (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 2013, 248). By gamifying their translation activities, fansubbing groups have marketed themselves heavily on the Internet and gained substantial support. In contrast, professional AVT translators do not interact

with their audiences or advertise themselves, which renders them as invisible agents in the online community. They are still supported by the authorities, and their jobs may not yet be in danger. In the eyes of Chinese audiences, however, their position has been weakened, and an increasing number of people prefer to watch fansubbed media products online rather than via official broadcasting channels (Lv and Li 2015).

This article has endeavoured to provide a broad outline of the power relations surrounding fansubbing activities in China. Future research may further the concept of gamification of translation in viewing the motivations of fansubbing groups as well as the conflicts between themselves and the professional translators commissioned by the authorities. The initial motivation of fansubbing groups is to make inaccessible media products available so that Chinese audiences can enjoy the same entertainment as the rest of the world. Their aim is to subtitle ‘fun for fun’, and their ‘gamified’ view of the translation process pushes monetary motivations into the background to the benefit of social and psychological gains such as group identification and personal approval. They are not paid, but nor do they work for nothing. They are empowered by a “good feeling” (Deterding 2012, 16) that is driven by the rewards earned from playing the fansubbing game. Professional translators, however, have a disparate view, as for them the work of subtitling represents work and responsibility. While breaking through boundaries enforced by political and economic powers, gamification in fansubbing media also leads to undesirable outcomes such as the imperialistic expansion of Anglophone hegemony into China. Although fansubbing groups translate from a great variety of languages, English-language originals are most popular, and their audiences are considered most sophisticated in China (Ji 2015). The crowd is overtly obsessed by the ‘game’ to be aware of the asymmetry of

translation between Chinese and English. Future research might empirically investigate user activities and interactions on fansubbing websites and other social networking platforms in order to further explore the new ideological conflicts and power relationships brought about by the evolving digital age.

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